PITTA

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MY TRYST WITH BIRDWATCHING

Lt Cdr Antriksh Duggal

Bluethroat (Photo: Srikanth Bhamidipati)

My tryst with bird watching began when I got transferred to Hyderabad from Mumbai about three years ago. I obtained accommodation at the Naval Officers' Mess in the DRDO Township in Kanchanbagh. Being already a lover of nature, I was delighted to find that the Township had an abundant cover of wooded areas with some parts tending to be untouched forests. If one were to behold before one's eyes a swath of the Township as a sample, one would see a view of a pied parity between concrete and natural jungle. The mottled melding of manmade structures and foliage seemed as an interlocked mosaic of marble.

It was in an environment such as this, also, where time seemed to sleepily pass by, that I took my first steps in the field of birding. It started off with my little avian friends, which earlier would just be little specks flying by or bobbing about on a branch, now beginning to appear conspicuously in my sight. It was as though a new awareness had descended upon me that enabled me to take better note of my feathery friends.

The reasons for this new awareness could be attributed, I dare say, to the luxury of more time in hand, which I earlier did not have, and an enhancement in patience. Nonetheless, the torch was lit and the shimmery sunlight began to shine upon the emerging branches of my freshly germinated hobby.

Asian Paradise-flycatcher
(Photo: Lt Cdr Antriksh Duggal)

As the plant of my newfound interest grew and the skill of observation burgeoned, I was able to discern colours and plumage patterns, disparate shapes and sizes, calls and cries. Each new point of observation was an enhancement akin to a brick being laid upon a new wall being built.

I purchased a field guide to help me identify species. My list of successful identifications of species was like a new personal collection. Every augmentation in the list made me swell with pride and afforded a sense of satisfaction, while, also, leaving a thirst for more in its wake. Each new species identified was a 'lifer' and made me wonder how much more there was to see and record and enjoy. With the theatre of my balcony and immediate environs of the Mess as my playing field, I had donned the cap of a 'backyard birder.'

My initial implements consisted of the aforementioned guide, a notebook and a pair of naked eyes. With straining eyes I would try edging in as close to a bird as I could in order to observe it; only, to my chagrin, to find the little thing fly away before I could get much idea of its identity. With varying degrees of success in observation based on my stealth, I dragged my way forward within the shackles of my impediment. A pall of frustration found a seat in my heart, making me feel that I was doing things in a woefully wrong way. I was trying to pierce the darkness with a candle where an omnidirectional torch light was essential. Little did I know then that, to emerge from this pall, I would be steered by fate toward the Deccan Birders.

I had finally decided to buy a pair of binoculars. After an initial technical study and survey I had homed on to a model and a place from where to buy it. The vendor who sold me the binoculars also mentioned to me in passing about a 'Mr Lawrence' who was a birder and gave me his number.

Tricoloured Munia (Photo: Srikanth Bhamidipati)

At this juncture I would like to bring to one's consideration the nature of fate or destiny, if one wishes to so call it. What is it that made that gentleman mention to me what he did? What made me zero in on this particular vendor? What if I had approached another vendor who would have merely minded his own beeswax? Would I never have gotten to find out about the Deccan Birders or would I have stumbled upon them, nonetheless, but at a later date?

I do not have answers to these questions, but I do believe that one can, to a certain extent, shape one's destiny and alter one's fate by grasping opportunities or taking risks/chances through informed thought and action. It does not do my article well to dwell too much upon this subject and I also do not wish to digress. However, I would like to add that I wish to muse over the nature of such things at length in the solitudes of some jungle or lakeside or montane valley, where I would have invariably gone birding (perchance with the Deccan Birders).

Painted Francolin (Photo: Srikanth Bhamidipati)

Since that cardinal day, I have been on numerous birding trips with various members of the club, and had many varied experiences, from the soothing hum of lapping waves at Gandipet Lake and Ameenpur Lake to the rich verdure of the Ananthagiri Hills, Damagundam Forest and Manjeera Wildlife Sanctuary. Stalking the spoor of the Indian Pitta in the undergrowth, patrolling the woods for the Eurasian Wryneck, anticipating the arrival of the Bluethroat alongside fields on village roads, trying to catch some time to observe the constantly flitting Tricoloured Munias, meditating over the magnitude of the Painted Stork colonies, earnestly following its cackling call to get a sight of Painted Francolin, scanning the grasses to spot the Rain Quail, jumping excitedly on sighting a bird of prey, trying to track the elusive Forest Wagtail – these are just a few of the experiences I've had hitherto. I wish, with alacrity, to add to the foregoing corpus of my experiences under the able fold of this esteemed club. The members of the club are like mentors to me in the field from whom I wish to learn greatly through my future association.

Rain Quail (Photo: Srikanth Bhamidipati)

Alas! While I write this, I am under transfer to New Delhi. My frequent interaction with the club will reduce, but certainly not wither away. For personnel in the defence, transfers become commonplace and are a part and parcel of life. I have become a member of the club and hence my future association will remain. It is a bittersweet time and I am also excited to see what avenues unfold before me at my next station in the field of birding. The skills that I've learnt and the knowledge that I've gained have become part of my quiver, which I shall put to use in future pastures of birding. What started off as a tryst has transformed into a passion that will last lifelong.

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BIRDING IN BOUNTIFUL BHUTAN

Trip Report: Bhutan, August 2017

Text and Photos: N Shiva Kumar

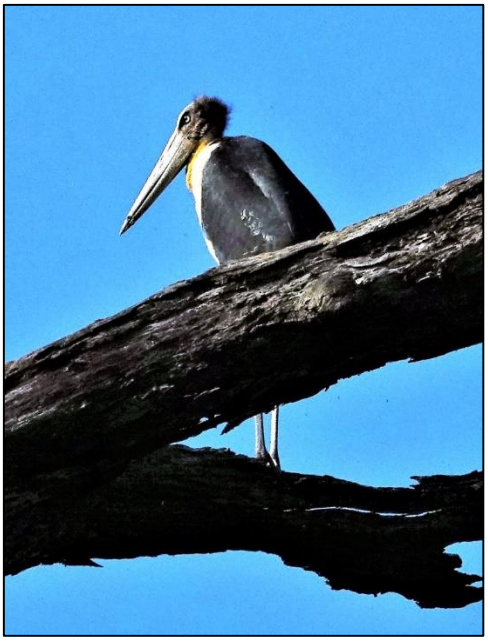
A view of snow-clad mountains at Bhutan

Like a giant metallic bird, the Drukair airliner deftly negotiated the ring of mountains to land at a small airport, albeit with remarkable surroundings. I was at Paro in Bhutan; a tiny aerodrome nestled among the mighty Himalayas and reckoned to be one of the most hazardous in the world. Paro airfield in Bhutan is 7300 feet above sea level and surrounded by sharp peaks of up to 18,000 feet high. So challenging is the landing that only about two dozen pilots in the world are said to be qualified to navigate on to the tarmac. The manual by-daylight-only approach through a winding valley and onto a runway that is only about 7500 feet long is complicated. For the passengers, though, the views are breathtakingly beautiful from the aircraft and windows seats are at a premium.

The small runway is snug as a bug in a rug in the middle of a pristine forest-clad valley. Strangely it was once a football field, converted to a petite international airport in 1968 by the Indian Army, initially for helicopters and later upgraded in stages to accommodate bigger aircraft.

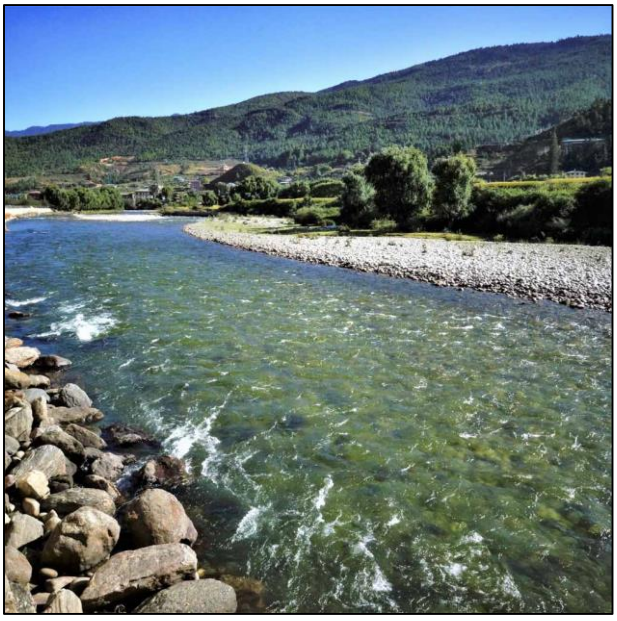
Even before I arrived in the Land of the Thunder Dragon, there were awesome views of Himalayas with sparkling snow-covered peaks. And as I stepped out of the airplane, I was welcomed by the wonderful whiff of crisp air laden with loads of oxygen. Coming in from New Delhi, one of the most polluted cities in the world, the air of Bhutan was like a breath of fresh air. The blaze of balmy sunshine from the azure sky combined with the mountain views was indeed invigorating.

Bhutan ranks in the top ten countries with the highest wildlife density on earth, and it also has the highest acreage of land under Protected Areas (PA) as well as the highest percentage of forest cover of any Asian nation. Bhutan has twenty-three Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas (IBAs), eight eco-regions, and a number of Important Plant Areas and wetlands. The biodiversity and ecologically floristic zones have made Bhutan home to a wide array of wildlife; hence Bhutan is regarded as one of the world's major biodiversity hotspots. Biodiversity is measured at different levels of biological niches together with genus, species and ecosystems along with their interactions. The Bhutan constitution demands that a minimum of 60% of the land must remain forested for all future generations; this currently stands at over 72%. It is the world's only carbon-negative country and its forests absorb more carbon dioxide per year than pollutants emitted.



Lesser Adjutant

My Mission Bhutan was to take cognizance of the flora and fauna in the landlocked Himalayan country having vast swathes of forested land. The tour director, Mincha Wangdi, a qualified environmentalist, was forewarned about my specific needs and he designed the itinerary to include not only the flora and fauna but associated cultural aspects of nature. Noting my profound interest, he personally escorted me on a whirlwind seven-day tour of Bhutan searching for elusive birds and animals, and also showcased the iconic sights and sounds of Paro, Chele La, Thimphu, Pele La, Dochula and Punakha.



River Paro Chu

Almost immediately after we started – just four kilometres from the airport – we stopped at the Paro Chu River to watch the Brown Dipper. These birds, as the name suggests, dunk their heads into the fast-flowing waters to feed. Dippers are small chunky birds, constantly on the move with a characteristic bobbing movement as they perch on boulders abutting the running waters. They were encountered many times during the seven day trip, all along the rivers flowing into Bhutan. Like a harbinger, the Dippers would always be the first to show up, and constantly put up a show and regaled us with their dip-feeding and melodious calls.

Brown Dipper

Ibisbill

Right after the delightful Dippers, we spotted a rarity, the Ibisbill, at another junction of Paro Chu. The Ibisbill is related to the waders, but adequately distinctive to merit its own family categorisation called *Ibidorhynchidae*. The Ibisbill looks like a combination of two different birds, sporting as it does the bill of the much more common Ibises. Hidden in the shingles of the river, well camouflaged and resembling a pebble, it was tricky to locate the bird. At sunset, the Ibisbill started to stir after a midday breather, searching for food in the mineral-rich waters, and I went trigger-happy taking pictures before the daylight dimmed.

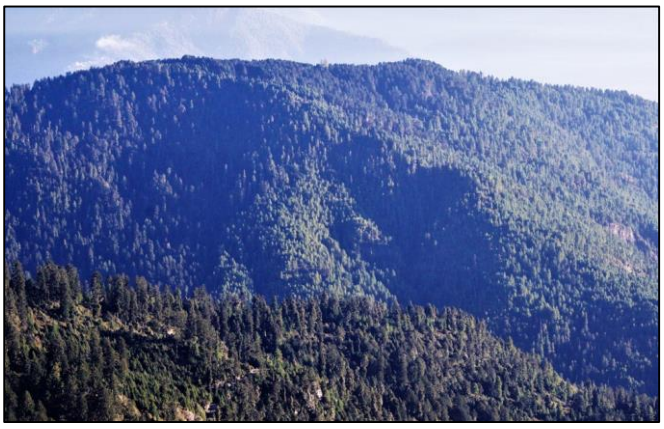
The next morning at 4:30AM, we ventured into the darkness in pursuit of more elusive birds. Driving uphill in the biting cold weather to Chele La pass, the Bondey-Haa Highway was pretty steep, with numerous twists and turns. Our morning sojourn was specifically to look for pheasants, which are stocky but spectacular ground birds. From a lower altitude of 7200 feet at Paro, we travelled towards Bhutan's highest motorable road. After a two-hour drive on winding roads covering a distance of just 50km, we reached Chele La pass at an elevation of nearly 14,000 feet by 6:30AM. At the crack of dawn, warm sunshine lit up the valley and we saw a Blood Pheasant saunter on the roadside. A little later, driving another five kilometres on curvaceous roads we espied some Himalayan Monals that swiftly disappeared into the jungles. However the beautiful Satyr Tragopan did not show up, and I was left with a bittersweet feeling.

At the top of the Chele La pass, we stopped for a blissful picnic breakfast under the azure sky, devoured our refreshments and washed it down with piping hot coffee. A mob of Red-billed Choughs flew in to check us out and then disappeared behind the high hills. The short break energised me to continue the journey eastwards towards Haa Valley. Before we could reach the rim, a couple of Black Eagles appeared in the sky and wheeled in circles giving views of their flight patterns. Another raptor was sighted plonked on a tower and troubled us with its identity for a while. After sustained scrutiny it was deciphered as a White-eyed Buzzard with ruffled feathers, hence looking larger than usual.

White-winged Grosbeak

A nearby flutter of wings indicated some White-winged Grosbeaks on the treetops that were dispersed by the grunts of feral horses grazing on the hillside. As we reached the rim of the Haa Valley, a flock of Snow Pigeons made their presence felt with loud wing beats.

Bhutan is packed with mountainous landscapes which are interconnected by several passes, and many of these valleys are well-known for trekking. Between April and June, one can enjoy pleasant weather along with blooming Rhododendron sprawled across the vibrant landscape of the valleys. It is the perfect time for picnicking and camping along with friends and family. From October to March, this area experiences winters and the spectacular views of the snow-capped towering mountains can be mesmerising.



A view of the forest-covered mountains

I had originally planned the trip for October to encounter nature at its maximum but fortunately, though this was August, saw a fleeting glimpse of a bulky Black Bear.

We returned to Paro for lunch and proceeded to the National Museum of Bhutan, which is perched on a high point and offers fabulous views of the Paro Valley. At a distance, a group of Ravens rejoiced in their mid-air pranks. We also saw several other usual species. The rest of the day was spent in relishing the relics and artefacts at the National Museum.

Black-tailed Crake

On Day-3, an early photo-hunting session led us to another uncommon bird, the Black-tailed Crake, at a site quite close to our hotel. At the lush swamp, a single Crake peeped in and out briefly but quickly concealed itself in the marshes skirted by reed beds. This Crake, because of its skulking habits, is infrequently recorded in its range and the global population has not been properly estimated. The riverside marsh also had noisy River Lapwings, White-capped Redstart, Pied Kingfishers and more Dippers enjoying the gentle morning sun. Stray specimens of Sandpiper also drifted on the riverbank picking up morsels and, further afield, a big group of Snow Pigeons took off towards the iconic Tiger Hill, as if in salutation.

The next day, leaving Paro, we travelled towards Thimphu, the capital of Bhutan, located 70km away in a valley with impressive modern and traditional buildings jostling for space. Later, getting away from the capital environs, we were on the lookout for the mysterious White-bellied Heron, a Critically Endangered species that occurs alongside rivers. Driving along the Pho Chhu River for many kilometres, we finally came to a known site of this rare bird. After four hours of waiting and watching, at the bifurcation of the river, we finally sighted the White-bellied Heron (WBH) hunting for fish. We were ecstatic and eagerly got out of our minivan to inspect the bird, but the commotion alerted the bird and it took off into dense vegetation!

Recently the 19th WBH annual count was conducted for five days in March 2021, using a hi-tech digital data collection platform. The survey established twenty-two Herons, which is five less than the previous year, and their status has become more precarious. “Habitat disturbances and degradation are seen as the main causes for its population decline,” says Wangdi.

On Day-5 morning, we again went searching for the White-bellied Heron along the Pho Chhu River, but five hours of exploration did not yield any results. *En route*, the countryside showed up a group of Buntings, Sparrows and other passerines playing hide-and-seek among the reeds. A flock of Finches and some Drongos on the wing were joined by assorted Babblers, Doves, Sunbirds and Black Bulbuls with their melodious tweets.

Rufous-vented Yuhina

Our morning disappointment turned to delight as we explored the Royal Botanical Park at Lampelri, which forms a biological corridor spread over 120 sq km between two National Parks. Here we sighted the National Animal of Bhutan, the Takin, a strange goat-antelope combination which is deeply ensconced in local mythology. The reason for selecting the Takin as the National Animal is based on a legend, which goes thus: when a prominent Lama, known as Divine Madman, visited Bhutan in the 15th century, devotees gathered to witness his magical powers and urged the monk to perform a miracle. He, in unorthodox methodology, demanded that he first be served a whole cow and a goat for lunch. He devoured these with relish, then took the goat's head and stuck it onto the skeleton of the cow. Then with a snap of his fingers he commanded the strange beast to come to life. To everybody's astonishment the new animal did come alive and, to this day, these beasts can be seen grazing on the mountain sides of Bhutan.

Takin

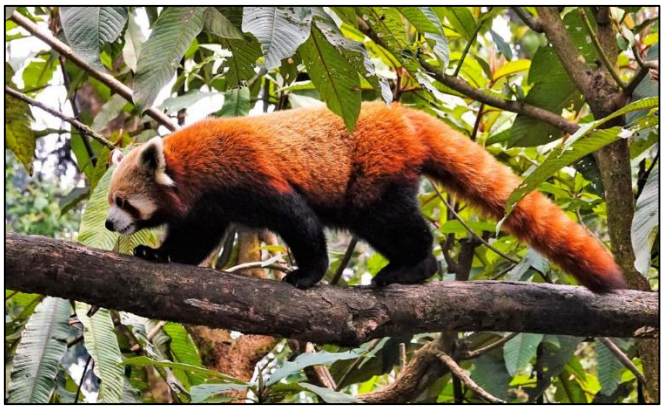
The Takin continues to befuddle taxonomists, and the famous biologist George Schaller once called it a 'bee-stung moose'. However, these animals are on the decline and need effective conservation strategies for survival.

Yellow-rumped Honeyguide

The day ended with us exploring a few trekking trails in the park, where we encountered an assemblage containing a Brown Parrotbill, a couple of Hornbills, a Yellow-rumped Honeyguide, a Red-billed Leiothrix, a Fire-tailed Myzornis etc. The park had lived up to its reputation as a preferred bird observation junction!

Rhododendron in bloom

There was also a variety of Rhododendrons in bloom in many shades of red and orange in the sprawling park. As we were about to leave the location, the *pièce de résistance* of the day was the very adorable Red Panda sauntering on the treetops in a playful mood; again, unfortunately dwindling in numbers across the globe due to loss of habitat.



Red Panda

Day-6 was the most fruitful due to the sheer number of birds seen, along with fabulous views of the snow-covered mountains at Dochula Pass, located at an elevation of 10,170 feet. Our travel guru, Wangdi, had wisely chosen a hotel perched on an elevation that offered fantastic views of snowy mountains changing colours from a range of pink to orange as the sun moved from east to west. At Dochula Pass, we observed quite a few species: White-throated Laughingthrush, Scarlet Finch, Black-naped Oriole, Scarlet Minivets, Bhutan Laughingthrush, Small Niltava, Spotted Laughingthrush, Spotted Nutcracker and a whole lot of other winged wonders.

Rufous Sibia

Blue-fronted Redstart female

Since crisscrossing the mountainous terrain and negotiating the hills and dales takes up a lot of time, by the end of the seventh day, we had covered about 800km in our search for wildlife, flora and boisterous birds in Bhutan. On the penultimate day, over the last supper in Bhutan, celebrating the successful trip, I made a list of almost 80 birds in 7 days. This may not sound like much when compared to the 770 species that have been recorded for Bhutan – but, given the difficult terrain and conditions, and particular preferences of many of the species, I think we may not even have got these many if not for the expertise of Wangdi.

Pine trees with cones

Each year Bhutan's bird list grows longer because of Bhutan's varied biodiversity and increasing systematic birding that is happening in the kingdom. That night, I pondered about Bhutan, where GDP is ignored and Gross National Happiness (GNH) is measured as a quotient. To imbibe that GNH-pleasure into me as a twitcher and trigger-happy lensman, I hope to take up a more extensive cross-country romance with Bhutan in the near future and also meet the revered and rare Black-necked Cranes.

Gangkar Puensum, highest peak in Bhutan

The full list of birds seen during the trip is given below:

Sl No	Species Name	Scientific Name	Sl No	Species Name	Scientific Name
1	Himalayan Monal	*Lophophorus impejanus*	9	Black-tailed Crake	*Porzana bicolor*
2	Satyr Tragopan	*Tragopan satyra*	10	White-breasted Waterhen	*Amaurornis phoenicurus*
3	Kalij Pheasant	*Lophura leucomelanos*	11	Purple Swamphen	*Porphyrio poliocephalus*
4	Blood Pheasant	*Ithaginis cruentus*	12	Asian Openbill	*Anastomus oscitans*
5	Eurasian Collared Dove	*Streptopelia decaocto*	13	Black Stork	*Ciconia nigra*
6	Yellow-footed Green Pigeon	*Treron phoenicopterus*	14	Woolly-necked Stork	*Ciconia episcopus*
7	Emerald Dove	*Chalcophaps indica*	15	Black-crowned Night Heron	*Nycticorax nycticorax*
8	Indian Cuckoo	*Cuculus micropterus*	16	Indian Pond Heron	*Ardeola grayii*

Sl No	Species Name	Scientific Name	Sl No	Species Name	Scientific Name
17	Cattle Egret	*Bubulcus ibis*	48	Rufous Treepie	*Dendrocitta vagabunda*
18	Grey Heron	*Ardea cinerea*	49	Red-billed Chough	*Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*
19	White-bellied Heron	*Ardea insignis*	50	Alpine (aka Yellow-billed) Chough	*Pyrrhocorax graculus*
20	Great Egret	*Ardea alba*	51	Northern Raven	*Corvus corax*
21	Ibisbill	*Ibidorhyncha struthersii*	52	Large-billed Crow	*Corvus macrorhynchos*
22	Black-winged Stilt	*Himantopus himantopus*	53	Thick-billed Flowerpecker	*Dicaeum agile*
23	Little Ringed Plover	*Charadrius dubius*	54	House Sparrow	*Passer domesticus*
24	Northern Lapwing	*Vanellus vanellus*	55	Russet Sparrow	*Passer rutilans*
25	River Lapwing	*Vanellus duvaucelii*	56	White-winged Grosbeak	*Mycerobas carnipes*
26	Bronze-winged Jacana	*Metopidius indicus*	57	Fire-tailed Myzornis	*Myzornis pyrrhoura*
27	Osprey	*Pandion haliaetus*	58	Brown Parrotbill	*Cholornis unicolor*
28	Black-winged Kite	*Elanus caeruleus*	59	Black-chinned Yuhina	*Yuhina nigrimenta*
29	Oriental Honey Buzzard	*Pernis ptilorhynchus*	60	Oriental White-eye	*Zosterops palpebrosus*
30	Shikra	*Accipiter badius*	61	Rufous-throated Wren Babbler	*Spelaeornis caudatus*
31	Lesser Fish Eagle	*Icthyophaga humilis*	62	Slender-billed Scimitar Babbler	*Xiphirhynchus superciliaris*
32	Brahminy Kite	*Haliastur indus*	63	Rufous Sibia	*Heterophasia capistrata*
33	Black Kite	*Milvus migrans*	64	Red-billed Leiothrix	*Leiothrix lutea*
34	Upland Buzzard	*Buteo hemilasius*	65	Brown Dipper	*Cinclus pallasii*
35	Great Hornbill	*Buceros bicornis*	66	Indian Robin	*Saxicoloides fulicatus*
36	Oriental Pied Hornbill	*Anthracoceros albirostris*	67	White-rumped Shama	*Copsychus malabaricus*
37	Common Hoopoe	*Upupa epops*	68	Small Niltava	*Niltava macgrigoriae*
38	Yellow-rumped Honeyguide	*Indicator xanthonotus*	69	Plumbeous Water Redstart	*Phoenicurus fuliginosus*
39	Great Barbet	*Psilopogon virens*	70	White-capped Water Redstart	*Chaimarrornis leucocephalus*
40	Coppersmith Barbet	*Psilopogon haemacephalus*	71	Blue-fronted Redstart	*Phoenicurus frontalis*
41	Green Bee-eater	*Merops orientalis*	72	Rufous-vented Yuhina	*Yuhina occipitalis*
42	Dollarbird	*Eurystomus orientalis*	73	Lesser Adjutant	*Leptoptilos javanicus*
43	Common Kingfisher	*Alcedo althis*	74	Black-naped Oriole	*Oriolus chinensis*
44	Crested Kingfisher	*Megaceryle lugubris*	75	White-throated Laughingthrush	*Garrulax albogularis*
45	Pied Kingfisher	*Ceryle rudis*	76	Bhutan Laughingthrush	*Garrulax imbricatus*
46	Scarlet Minivet	*Pericrocotus (flammeus) speciosus*	77	Spotted Laughingthrush	*Garrulax ocellatus*
47	Black Drongo	*Dicrurus macrocercus*	78	Spotted Nutcracker	*Nucifraga caryocatactes*

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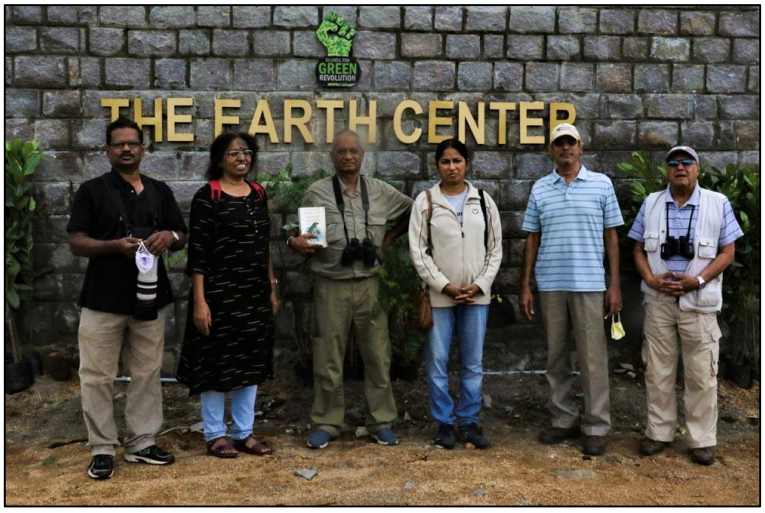
Trip Report: The Earth Center, Anmaspally, Hyderabad, July 14, 2021

Text: Surekha Aitabathula; Photos: Dr G Samuel Sukumar



The team at The Earth Center

Accepting the invitation of Mr K Laxma Reddy and Mrs K Leela Reddy, who run the Earth Centre, we headed out one fine July Wednesday morning to Anmaspally Village in Kadthal Mandal, Ranga Reddy District. Located approximately 60km from Hyderabad, the Earth Centre is an institution that promotes earth leadership and sustainable development. This Centre, in turn, has been developed by Council for Green Revolution (CGR) – an environmental organisation that works for the protection of the environment and focuses especially on the restoration of damaged ecosystems.

Inaugurated in April 2021, the Earth Centre aims to become a premier environmental education centre to bring about a positive change. The Centre envisions promoting it as an independent think tank and a research centre that will strive towards realization of Sustainable Development Goals as set up by the United Nations.

Laughing Dove

We took a beaten track amidst the verdant surroundings of the Earth Centre and found 32 bird and 10 butterfly species. Everyone in the group also attempted to raise their learning curve about tree/plant identification.

Terminalia chebula

Ficus bengalensis

Large Grey Babbler

Indian Silverbill

It was a cloudy day, and the butterflies hadn't yet come out to dry their wings even after 09:00AM; however, when the sun peeped out a little later, we were treated to the usual suspects like Tawny Coster, Common Crow and Common Jezebel, as well as some not-so-common ones like the Hedge Blue and White Orange Tip.

Hedge Blue

White Orange Tip

There were also some interesting moths around.

Eupterote sp

Eupterote citrina

All in all, a very pleasant weekday morning outing is what we were presented with at the Anmaspally Earth Centre.

The full list of birds and butterflies seen is given below:

List of Birds					
Sl No	**Species name**	**Scientific name**	**Sl No**	**Species name**	**Scientific name**
1	Common Myna	*Acridotheres tristis*	17	Indian Robin	*Copsychus fulicatus*
2	Ashy Prinia	*Prinia socialis*	18	Black Drongo	*Dicrurus macrocercus*
3	Common Tailorbird	*Orthotomus sutorius*	19	Purple-rumped Sunbird	*Leptocoma zeylonica*
4	Scaly-breasted Munia	*Lonchura punctulata*	20	Rufous Treepie	*Dendrocitta vagabunda*
5	Red-vented Bulbul	*Pycnonotus cafer*	21	Large Grey Babbler	*Argya malcomi*
6	Green Bee-eater	*Merops orientalis*	22	Shikra	*Accipiter badius*
7	Spotted Dove	*Spilopelia chinensis*	23	House Crow	*Corvus splendens*
8	Asian Palm Swift	*Cypsiurus balasiensis*	24	Indian Pond Heron	*Ardeola grayii*
9	Blue Rock Pigeon	*Columba livia*	25	Barn Swallow	*Hirundo rustica*
10	Crested Lark	*Galerida cristata*	26	Indian Peafowl	*Pavo cristatus*
11	Lesser Whistling-duck	*Dendrocygna javanica*	27	Indian Silverbill	*Euodice malabarica*
12	Spot-billed Duck	*Anas poecilorhyncha*	28	Cattle Egret	*Bulbulcus ibis*
13	Common Coot	*Fulica atra*	29	Little Egret	*Egretta garzetta*
14	Little Grebe	*Tachybaptus ruficollis*	30	Laughing Dove	*Spilopelia senegalensis*
15	Red-wattled Lapwing	*Vanellus indicus*	31	Common Hawk Cuckoo	*Hierococcyx varius*
16	Yellow-billed Babbler	*Argya affinis*	32	Grey Francolin	*Francolinus pondicerianus*

List of Butterflies					
Sl No	**Species name**	**Scientific name**	**Sl No**	**Species name**	**Scientific name**
1	Common Mormon	*Papilio polytes*	6	Gram Blue	*Euchrysops cnejus*
2	Common Emigrant	*Catopsilia pomona*	7	Small Grass Yellow	*Eurema brigitta*
3	Plain Tiger	*Danaus chrysippus*	8	Lime Butterfly	*Papilio demoleus*
4	Tawny Coster	*Acraea terpsicore*	9	Common Crow	*Euploea core*
5	Lemon Pansy	*Junonia lemonias*	10	White Orange Tip	*Anthocaris cardamines*

Some other photos taken during the trip:

Lemon Pansy

Purple-rumped Sunbird male

Indian Robin male

Common Grass Yellow

Mottled Emigrant

Seed ball

Rufous Treepie

Lime Butterfly

The group

Potter Wasp (Delta sp.)

Spotted Dove

Green Bee-eater

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Bird of the Month

Text and Photo: Umesh Mani

Kentish Plover (*Charadrius alexandrinus*)

Kentish Plover (Chennai, February 03, 2019)

Order: Charadriiformes
Family: Charadriidae
Genus: *Charadrius*
Species: *C. alexandrinus*
Size: 15-17 cm

Description & distribution: The Kentish Plover is a small and stocky wader of the family *Charadriidae*. It is regarded as sexually dimorphic: both male and female birds have a generally pale plumage, with white underparts, grey-brown upperparts, blackish legs and a short, dark bill, but during breeding, the males additionally display a distinct dark, broken breast band, and dark ear coverts. The white forehead extends as a distinct supercilium, and a clear white hind collar is present. In breeding plumage, the male has a broad black horizontal band on the head and a brighter rufous nape and crown (absent in the South Indian race, *C. a. seebohmi*). In flight, it shows a narrow white wing-bar and prominent white sides to the tail, which are diagnostic. Males have longer tarsi and longer flank feathers, which are believed to provide an advantage during incubation and brood care. The breeding ornaments of the male are more prominent early in the breeding season. Besides, they show a correlation to rainfall: the breeding ornaments become brighter later in the season in areas with higher rainfall, and lighter in areas with less rainfall.

Two subspecies are recognized: the nominate race, *C. alexandrinus*, which breeds in Pakistan and is a winter visitor to the Indian coastal regions and the Nicobar Islands, and the South Indian race, *C. a. seebohmi*, also seen in Sri Lanka. The Kentish Plover has a wide distribution, with populations in Northern Africa, parts of Central Asia and Europe. It is a rare vagrant in Australia. While most populations are resident, some populations migrate to Africa in winter. Recently, in 2020, the southern race has been proposed to be split and renamed as Hanuman Plover, named thus after the chain of islands in the Palk Straits, which are said to have been created by the Hindu god, Lord Hanuman.

Habitat & behaviour: The Kentish Plover breeds on the shores of saline lakes, wetlands, salt marshes, lagoons, coastal sand dunes, tundra and semi-arid desert. Males are territorial and defend their territories actively by chasing, fighting or posturing. When approached by a predator, the parents try to protect their young by running away, calling, crawling on the ground while flapping their wings, or through a broken-wing display. The chicks too try to find a spot where they can hide by crouching down and remaining motionless. When moving away from the nest for any reason, the parents tend to cover the eggs with nesting material, to keep the eggs insulated as well as to protect them from predators.

During non-breeding season, the Kentish Plover is usually seen to forage individually, or in small, loose flocks of 20-30. Occasionally, though, they may merge with and form a flock of 250 or more individuals of different species. It is a visual forager, feeding by looking, running or stopping, catching its prey by pecking, probing the sand with their bills, or even by holding their mouths open to catch flies. Its diet consists primarily of small aquatic and terrestrial invertebrates, like insects and their larvae (for instance, beetles, grasshoppers or flies), mollusks, crustaceans, spiders and marine worms. Its usual call is a short, soft *pit* or doubled *pidup*, sometimes combined with short trills or a plaintive *wheet*. The alarm call is a *kittup*, which may be paired with a sharp *too eet*.

Nesting: The Kentish Plover is a solitary or semi-colonial nester. It generally breeds between March and August – May and June in Gujarat, and April to August in South India. It can be monogamous or polygamous – breeding pair fidelity in subsequent seasons has been noted, but mate changes have

also been observed as frequently. Interestingly, some populations show extra-pair fertilisations, with both males and females copulating with members of the opposite sex other than their breeding mate. Hence, both members of the breeding pair may also parent multiple broods, or replace a failed brood with another during the same season. The nest is usually a shallow depression in the sand, above the tide mark on the seashore, or in a dry river bed, preferably among light vegetation, and away from human habitation. It may be lined with a variety of materials – pebbles, shells, fish bones, grass and leaves. The usual clutch consists of 3 eggs, though sometimes it may be 2 or 4. The eggs are sandy brown, sometimes greenish-tinged, and with blackish marks. Both male and female share incubation and parental duties, and give broken-wing displays to distract predators if threatened.

Local name: The Kentish Plover is known as *'Kentish chikhli'* in Marathi, *'Kalarwala marwa'* in Punjabi, *'Chinna kottan'*, *'Uppu kothhi'* or *'Chinna mandai ullan'* in Tamil, and *'Manal kozhi'* in Malayalam.

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Bird Humour

Umesh Mani

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